DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 306 472 CG 021 605

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TITLE An Arena of Comfort during Adolescence.
PUB DATE May 89
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (61st, Chicago, IL, May 4-6, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Development; *Age Differences; College Students; Higher Education; High Schools; High School Students; *Parent Child Relationship; *Self Esteem
IDENTIFIERS *Nurturance

ABSTRACT

Research has consistently shown parents' nurturance, acceptance, affection, support, and attention to be positively related to their children's self-esteem. Absent in these investigations of the relationship between parental nurturance and self-esteem, however, has been a consideration of whether the nurturance bases upon which these "reflected appraisals" of self-esteem are evaluated vary with changes in age. This study was conducted to investigate the stability of parental nurturance as a basis for mid-adolescent and late-adolescent judgments of global self-esteem. Data were collected from three samples: 61 15-year-old high school sophomores, 98 17-year-old high school juniors and seniors, and 333 19-year-old college students. All subjects were from intact families; high school students were living with their parents. All subjects completed a demographic questionnaire, the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, and two forms of the Parental Nurturance Scale to measure mother's nurturance and father's nurturance. The results revealed that the self-esteem scores for the 19-year-olds were significantly higher than the scores for the younger age groups. Self-esteem was found to be strongly related to both mother's and father's nurturance at all three age levels. This high level of stability in the relationship between parental nurturance and adolescent's self-esteem across all three age groups suggests that parental nurturance is an important "arena of comfort" for adolescents during the potentially turbulent adolescent years. (NB)

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An Arena of Comfort During Adolescence

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ABSTRACT: *The relationship of parental nurturance to self-esteem for 15-year olds, 17-year olds, and 19-year olds was investigated. Results revealed a high level of stability in the relationship between these variables across all three adolescent age groups, suggesting parental nurturance as an important "arena of comfort" (Simmons, 1988) for adolescents during these potentially turbulent years.*

Since the introduction of the concept of the "social self" (James, 1890) into the psychological literature, few social psychologists have denied the critical importance of social interactions in the development and definition of the self. Furthered by Cooley's (1902) "looking glass self" and Mead's (1934) more formalized discussion of symbolic interactionism, we have come to view social interactions as prominent in the process of apprehending and assuming specific characteristics about one's self. In the investigation of one dominant evaluative dimension of the self (i.e., global self-esteem), interactions with one's parents have been particularly implicated in this process. Of special note in these investigations has been the strong direct

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Paper presented at the 61st Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago, May, 1989.

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relationship between parental nurturance and global self-esteem (see Bachman, 1982; Buri, 1989; Buri, Kirchner, & Walsh, 1987; Coopersmith, 1967; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Peterson, Southworth, & Peters, 1983; Rohner, 1986; Rosenberg, 1979; Sears, 1970). Consistently parents' nurturance, acceptance, affection, support, and attention have been found to positively relate to their children's self-esteem.

Absent in these investigations of the relationship between parental nurturance and self-esteem, however, has been a consideration of whether the nurturance bases upon which these "reflected appraisals" (Rosenberg, 1979) of self-esteem are evaluated vary with changes in age. Therefore the focus of the present study was the investigation of the stability of parental nurturance as a basis for mid-adolescent and late-adolescent judgments of global self-esteem. It is hypothesized that parental nurturance is a stable predictor of self-esteem across these adolescent age groups.

Method

Subjects

Data were collected from three distinct samples. The first sample consisted of 107 sophomore high school students who participated in the study as part of a class project. The responses of 29 students were not included in the present analyses either because one of their parents had died or because their parents were divorced or separated. The responses of an additional 17 students were eliminated from the analyses because their response forms were inadequately completed. The remaining 61 students (32 females, 29 males, mean age = 15.6 years) were from intact families and were still living at home with their parents.

The second sample consisted of 155 high school students who agreed to participate in the study as part of a junior/senior-level psychology course project. Once the data from 27 students were eliminated because of incomplete response forms and the data from an additional 30 students were excluded from the present analyses because of parental divorce, separation, or death, the responses of 53 females and 45 males remained. Each of these 98 participants (mean age = 17.5 years) was from an intact family and was still living with his or her parents.

Data for the third sample were collected from 397 college students who were enrolled in a freshman introductory psychology course. They agreed to participate in the study for course credit. The data from 35 students were excluded because of parental divorce, separation, or death and the data from 19 students were eliminated because of inadequate completion of the questionnaires. The remaining 333 students (168 females, 165 males, mean age = 18.9 years) were from intact families.

Materials and Procedure

Each participant was asked to complete three questionnaires and one demographic information sheet. The order in which these forms were presented to the participants was randomized. Each of the research participants was told that we were investigating family factors that may influence the development of self-esteem. They were instructed not to take too much time on any one questionnaire item since we were interested in their first reaction to each statement. They were also encouraged not to look for the "right" answer or the "best" answer to each item, but rather, to respond to each statement as honestly as possible.

Self-esteem. Each of the participants was asked to complete the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (Fitts, 1965). The Total Positive self-esteem score was computed for each participant. The higher the score on this scale, the higher an individual's self-esteem. As operationalized by Fitts:

> Persons with high scores tend to like themselves, feel that they are persons of value and worth, have confidence in themselves, and act accordingly. People with low scores are doubtful about their own worth; see themselves as undesirable; ... and have little faith or confidence in themselves (p.2).

Fitts (1965) reported a test-retest reliability for the Total Positive self-esteem score of r = .92.

Parental nurturance. Buri, Misukanis, and Mueller (1988) presented the Parental Nurturance Scale, a 24-item Likert-type scale used to measure parental nurturance from the point of view of an adolescent evaluating the nurturance he or she had received from his or her parents. Two forms of this scale were reported, one to measure the appraised nurturance of the mother and one to measure the appraised nurturance of the father. The test-retest reliabilities (N = 85) and Cronbach (1951) coefficient alpha values (N = 156) for these scales were, respectively: .92 and .95 for the Mother's Nurturance Scale; and .94 and .93 for the Father's Nurturance Scale. Examples of items from the Mother's Nurturance Scale are: "My mother seldom says nice things about me," "My mother is often critical of me and nothing I ever do seems to please her," and "My mother expresses her warmth and affection for me."

Demographic information. In addition to completing the Tenneessee Self-Concept Scale, the Mother's Nurturance Scale, and the Father's Nurturance

Scale, the participants also provided information concerning (a) their gender, (b) their age, (c) whether one of their parents had died, and (d) whether their parents were divorced or separated.

Results

The mean Total Positive self-esteem scores for the 15-year olds, the 17-year olds, and the 19-year olds, respectively, were 322.9, 326.3, and 338.4. A simple ANOVA revealed a significant difference among these means [$F(2,489) = 11.23$, $p < .0001$]. Table 1 contains a summary of these analyses. A posteriori comparisons revealed that the self-esteem scores for the 19-year olds were significantly higher than were the scores for the two remaining age groups.

Table 1

ANOVA Summary for Self-Esteem of 15-, 17-, and 19-Year Olds

Source	*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*
Self-esteem	2	19676	9838	11.23***
Error	489	428450	876	
Total	491	448126		

***$p < .0001$

The bivariate correlations for self-esteem with mother's and father's nurturance at all three age levels are presented in Table 2. Clearly self-esteem is strongly related to both mother's and father's nurturance at all

three adolescent age levels [these correlation coefficients ranged in value from r = .512 (for mother's nurturance with 19-year olds) to r = .551 (for mother's nurturance with 15-year olds)]. Also presented in Table 2 are the

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations for Mother's and Father's Nurturance with Self-Esteem and R^2 Values When Regressing Self-Esteem on Mother's and Father's Nurturance for Three Samples

	r	R^2
High School Sophomores (N = 61)		
Mother's Nurturance	.551**	37.9%**
Father's Nurturance	.520**	
High School Seniors (N = 98)		
Mother's Nurturance	.522**	36.7%
Father's Nurturance	.534**	
College Freshmen (N = 333)		
Mother's Nurturance	.512**	37.7%
Father's Nurturance	.526**	

Note: **p < .00005

R^2 values derived by regressing self-esteem on mother's and father's nurturance. These R^2 values are conspicuously similar (i.e., .379, .367, and .377 for the 15-, the 17-, and the 19-year olds, respectively).

Discussion

There was a significant increase in global self-esteem in the present study when comparing the 19-year old sample to the 15-year old and the 17-year old samples. These results, however, add little of consequence to our understanding of self-esteem stability during adolescence. As several researchers (e.g., Blyth & Traeger, 1983; McCarthy & Hoge, 1982; Savin-Williams & Demo, 1983) have pointed out, cross-sectional designs (such as in the present study) are far less efficacious than are longitudinal designs for the investigation of self-esteem stability. The issue of import in the present study is not the stability of self-esteem across various adolescent age levels, but rather, the stability of the bases of self-esteem across those age levels. While numerous researchers have investigated self-esteem stability with age (e.g., Carlson, 1965; McCarthy & Hoge, 1982; O'Malley & Bachman, 1983; Pound, Hansen, & Putnam, 1977; Wylie, 1979), investigations of the stableness of the bases for self-esteem have paled by comparison (Blyth & Traeger, 1983).

Clearly the present results suggest a robust and stable relation between parental nurturance and self-esteem across the three adolescent age levels investigated. Strong nurturant relationships with one's mother and one's father provide stable bases for global self-esteem throughout the mid- to late-adolescent period. This is a time during which many individuals experience considerable change and discontinuity in their lives and are therefore in need of "an arena of comfort" (Simmons, 1988) where they can retreat to find stability, reassurance, and revitalization. When such an arena of comfort is available, then an individual is better able to cope with the stress of change and to tolerate areas of discontinuity within his or her life. The conspicuous

stability of the relation between parental nurturance and self-esteem in the present findings offer strong evidence that positive relationships with one's parents provide an important arena of comfort which may absorb the blows of adolescent change and discontinuity.

Conclusions

Given the fact that low self-esteem has been implicated in a host of deleterious adolescent behaviors [e.g., delinquency (Hall, 1966; Schwartz & Tangri, 1965), drug abuse (Bay, 1983; Kaplan & Meyerowitz, 1970), suicidal behavior (Braaten & Darling, 1962), academic underachieving (Ousek, 1977), dishonesty (Graf, 1971), etc.], the present study suggests parental support, acceptance, approval, and affirmation as a vital antidote to the pernicious side-effects of low self-esteem during adolescence. Strong, nurturing parent-adolescent relationships serve to buffer many of the negative effects of adolescent change, offering an arena of comfort in the midst of the adolescent sea of discontinuity.

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